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Granta: A literary journal for the '80s

By **Stephen Salisbury**
Inquirer Staff Writer

It used to be, in the old days, when literature seemed a swaggering frontier and writing seemed to matter, that the appearance of an aggressive new journal caused bells to ring and editors to arm.

That, in fact, was the point. Journals like Partisan Review were launched to make waves, as editor Philip Rahv made abundantly clear in that magazine's second issue, in May 1934.

"No hue and cry of propaganda," Rahv proclaimed in trumpeting the inevitable advance of working-class literature, "no lugubrious headshaking of wiseacres, and no amount of sneering on the part of those who persist in training their palsied hieroglyphics on the fly-paper of bourgeois class impotence can arrest its progress."

The Partisan Review hobbles on, somewhat palsied itself these days, but the frontier for the most part has been obliterated in American culture, and the shoot-'em-up times ruled by crusty, individualistic editors have passed into memory.

Nowadays, a literary journal seeking to make a splash goes button-down multinational. So it is that Granta magazine has made its appearance in the United States this summer.

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The combination of professional distribution and hot writers from hot countries has boosted Granta's British circulation to 35,000 — more than that of any other literary journal published there.

The first American issue (\$6.95), with an initial printing of about 10,000, features a lengthy eyewitness account of the anarchic collapse of Saigon by British poet James Fenton; an essay and story by Nadine Gordimer; tidbits on the Vietnam experience from ex-CIA agent Frank Snepp.

Commentary editor Norman Podhoretz and linguist and social critic Noam Chomsky, and additional pieces by Salman Rushdie, Gunter Grass, George Steiner and John Berger.

It is an impressive lineup of talent and a considerable amount of nonliterary material for an ostensibly literary journal. But Ruford is trying to break out of what he calls the "literary ghetto" and has determined that political writing may be a way to do it.

This, however, is not political writing in the combative, polemical vein of the old Partisan Review. Rather, it is writing that makes basic connections between self and society, art and culture, literature and the world. As such, it can be writing from the left or from the right, although the editor's sympathies fall with the former.

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